



Nawalgarh haveli paintings: few themes in the paintings

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ABSTRACT

Wall painting as an art genre enjoyed great popularity in India starting in the 2nd century B.C., but attaining its pinnacle only in the 6th century A.D., with the splending paintings of Ajanta and then others. In the 16-17th centuries they underwent a vigorous revival and played an important role in the decoration of the royal palaces, in the homes of the noble and rich, in temples and cenotaphs. Unfortunately the inveterate Indian custom of periodically 'renovating' the decoration of homes and temples by repainting them or drastically erasing parts of them is leading to the destruction of important works of art from the past. The aim of the present book is also to document the serious damage caused to this Indian artistic heritage. The earliest examples of Indian painting, that we find evidence of, are on the walls of some of the caves in the Kaimur Range of Central India, Vindhya Hills and some places in Uttar Pradesh. Nawalgarh is a town in Jhunjhunu district of Indian state Rajasthan. It is part of the Shekhawati region and is midway between Jhunjhunu and Sikar. Nawalgarh is famous for its fresco and havelis and considered as Golden City of Rajasthan. It is also the motherland of some great business families of India. The theme of the wall painting or frescoes decorating the beautiful "havelis" of Shekhawati region have changed over a period of time. In the earlier days at the time of its inception, mythology dominated the themes of frescoes, which shows the local legends, animal, portraits, hunting and wrestling. But a century later there was a change in the theme of the paintings to reflect the British influence in Indian culture. The traditional subjects were replaced by cars, trains, balloons, telephones, gramophones, men in suits hunting and portraits of haveli owners immaculately dressed.

Keywords : Wall paintings, Nawalgarh, Themes, Havelis, Frescoes, Merchant class.

Introduction:

Shekhawati has ever marked its presence on the national and international arena throughout trade and industry. However, during past few decades it has well registered its name with the world tourism too. Never would it attract the foreign visitors in so vast numbers as it has been attracting during past three decades. This part of the northeast Rajasthan about 100 to 200 kilometers north of Jaipur falling within the Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu districts has so far had an image of a sandy desert. The grand majestic forts, temples, palatial mansions or havelis. Nevertheless, they remained unnoticed. For, they remained unexposed to the eyes of the ruling Thikanas (small princely states), notably of Madawa, Dundlod, Fatehpur, and Nawalgarh did feel an urge to present these hidden treasures of art and culture before the eyes of the world community. Nawalgarh is a heritage city in Shekhawati region, 40 Km. from Jhunjhunu and 27 km. from Sikar and 132 km. from Jaipur.

There are about 100 havelis in Nawalgarh with beautiful paintings and frescoes on walls. The havelis began to come in to existence after the last quarter of the eighteenth century. They are creations of the rich merchants built between 1780 to 1900-35. The beautiful paintings and frescos on the wall of havelis do not only feast the eyes of the visitors, but they also mirror the contemporary Shekhawati life, the ways, the customs, the faiths and beliefs of the people, and also the craftsmanship of the unlettered artists. Hear visitors come in large numbers from various countries of Europe such as England, France, Germany and Italy. The foreigners see paintings but they do not sufficiently understand the thematic aspects of the subjects presented. Perhaps the escorting guides also do not or cannot give adequate information. I have tried to explain the thematic aspects as are required by a common viewer.

Majority of the paintings presents the religious and spiritual aspects of life. They present either gods or their incarnations, or the holy sages and their lives as given in the Holy Scrip-

tures. However, a sizeable portion of them presents other aspects of life too. Man lives in a civilized society and endeavors of life. He cannot feel contented, directing his energies towards dharma (a righteous life) and moksha (liberation from birth and death) alone. As he lives in the world and for the world, it is only natural for him to pursue arth (wealth) and kaama (carnal pleasures) too.

(i).Adornment and Amorousness:

Man has ever been cautious and curious to look beautiful. Of course, nature has granted woman the instinct of adornment more than it has given to man. Nevertheless, men are also not wholly without it. Accordingly, this human tendency has been presented in many of the paintings. You can see both men and woman, either doing their hair or viewing their made up faces into the mirror. In some cases, the female attendants can be seen adorning the mistresses. The hermits and the sages could afford to live an ascetic's life. However, a worldly man cannot. He finds the present world more fruitful compared to the next one. Therefore he would naturally direct his energies to the requirements of body than of the soul. Many of the paintings present this aspect of life too. Lovers and paramours can be seen kissing on the cheeks or fondling the breasts of beloveds. They can also be seen with their hands around the partner's neck or pressing the delicate parts of body. You can also see the lovers offering flowers to their love and the beloveds offering wine to their heroes. Here or there, you can also have the glimpse of a copulating pair. Thus, the paintings represent the kaama aspect of the contemporary life too.

(ii) The Aristocrats and Armed sentinels:

Rajasthan has been the land of kings and princes. They lived a royal life with vast regalia and retinues. This kind of life has also been given due place in the paintings. The kings and princes are often seen in royal robes and a Rajasthanani saafa (turban) on the head. Wearing long beards and moustaches,

has been a cultural tradition of the ruling classes. Hence, they are often seen wearing them. Whenever, the kings or princes would come out of their palaces, they would not come alone. They would carry a long retinue of attendants. Often, they would be taken in processions. You can see them riding on the elephants or horses, with a long train of attendants, and the musicians heralding their passage by blowing trumpets or beating drums. In some paintings, you can see the royal celebrities being carried into the coaches or the palanquins.

Inside the apartments, the aristocratic women can often be seen sitting at the windows, feasting their eyes with the outside world, or enjoying the salubrious air of the morning. Outside their apartments, you can also see the sentinels, guarding their masters with the guns and swords in the hands, and their eyes quite alert to keep a proper vigil. In addition, there are paintings where the king or the prince is giving a public audience or is being entertained by the court musicians. He can be seen smoking his hookah with the courtiers seated around. Thus the royal life has also been given due space in the paintings.

(iii) Games and sports:

Nature has gifted humankind with power, strength and the spirit of bravery and heroism. On occasions, the spirit seeks an outlet and the person desires to display it in one form or the other. In olden days, performance of brave feats and fighting were the compulsory parts of training and education. Hence, men especially of the ruling classes would be trained and made adept at fencing, wrestling, riding, hunting and fighting with spears and other weapons. In course of time, some other sports involving not so much of physical competence also became popular and prevalent among the common public.

One of popular games of Shekhawati is the chaupad or dice, the same, for which the kauravas had invited pandavas. The pandavas had played and lost their kingdom and the wealth. The game is often played by four players, though not a strict rule. Even two can play it. The other popular game of Shekhawati is kite flying. It is played during winter season especially in January, when the festival of maker sankranti is celebrated. People buy reels of long thread and a large number of kites. They take the thread through a specially prepared paste so that it becomes stiff and sharp to rip the threads of the rivals. The kite flying continues for a month about. Many paintings carry the scenes of dice playing and the kite flying.

The festivals of Gangaur and Teej are very important and popular in Sekhawati. They are celebrated by the women folk. Women hang swings under the trees and enjoy swinging during the festivals. The men, on the other hand, take part in the horse, camel and cart races. Jump, race and wrestling competitions are also popular as they are regularly organized at the time of fairs and festivals. Paintings in a good number can be seen depicting these sports.

Hundreds of years ago, the rich merchants or kings used to construct large ponds or water reservoirs. The ponds would get filled with the rain water during the rainy season. People and the cattle would drink it throughout the year. People used them as the picnic sports too. The sporting young men would bathe, jump and dive into water and show the swimming skills as well. In course of time, India became a democratic state. The task of supplying water went into the hands of the government. Hence, new machines and the tube wells came into being. However, the ponds still have their relevance and so they exist. There are certain wandering tribes such as antes in Rajasthan. The members of these tribes are very adept at the aerobatic or acrobatic skills. They can walk on ropes, can roll into air and do the somersaults. They can also take their trim and agile body through the narrow iron rings or a pair of sticks tied at both ends. Painting on such games can also be seen on the walls.

(iv) The merchant class:

Keeping with the ancient system of the social stratification,

the Hindu society has been divided into four major classes; brahmins enjoy the highest status among hindus, followed by the kshatriyas (the ruling class). Next comes the business or merchant class, while the shudras at the lowest rung (of course the walls of casteism are gradually falling down at the level of the society, and the law of state does not make any distinction on that basis). We have already seen in the foregoing chapters that the Brahmins and the kshatriyas have been capturing attention of the artists and the writers. The people of the merchant class have also been equally inspiring them. Firstly, as they run trade and business, they are the men of wealth. Secondly, it is these people who are the builders and masters of the havelis and large mansions that capture everybody's attention. In addition, they have been expending a good share of their earnings in the acts of charity. Naturally, they win status and respect of the public.

Keeping with the times, though a major change has come in the life and living style of the present generation of this class. Nevertheless the older generation of merchants had a typical distinctive dress and appearance that would grant them a separate identity. They would wear dhoti and kurta, would tie a turban on the heads and carry a stick or umbrella in their hands. The younger people, as they would sit at the shop for the whole day until late evening, would enjoy a morning walk in the gardens. The older ones staying at homes would sit in the bathhaks (the meeting – halls) and give audience to the people, visiting them with various purposes. Paintings can be seen presenting this kind of the picture of this class.

(V) Riding and chivalry:

Those were the days when there were no cars, jeeps and engines for carrying people from one place to another. Camels, Horses and Elephants were the only means of travelling and transporting goods from one place to another. They were a regular part of the armies and the fighting forces too. Therefore, the people, especially of the ruling class, would be adequately trained and were well skilled in riding and fighting against the enemy with these animals. On occasions, especially on certain festivals, the horse, elephant and camel races would be organized, or the well adorned animals with the riders would be taken out in processions. The love heroes can be seen escaping away with their prized beloveds, riding either on a camel or on a horse to carry them to their homelands. The Famous Love-stores quite common and prevalent among people have been that of the love of Dhola and Maru, and Prithviraj and Sanyogita. I would not go in detail about their life history here. To say in brief, they have been royal princes and princesses, loving each other, secretly planning to elope away and subsequently marry and be the life partners against the parental accord and acceptance. Paintings depicting these animals in various roles, and the love saga and the heroes escaping away with their beloveds can be seen almost on the walls of every haveli.

(VI) The royal courts:

The kings or the princes would frequently sit at the open court either to hear the aggrieved or to discuss the state affairs with the courtiers. In a free and merry mood, they would have the special evenings of dance and music too. The king and the queen would sit in the company of the courtiers, while the musicians and the dancers, especially the female dancers of the royal court would entertain them. Many paintings carry this aspect of the royal life too.

(VII) Festivals:

Hindus have a festival in every month of the year. However, three festivals have drawn a special attention of the painters. Accordingly, the scenes related to these festivals can be witnessed on the walls of every haveli. First is the festival of holi, the festival of colors. The festival of dholandi is celebrated. People forget all the differences, and dance and sing together. They affectionately smear color powder or spray the colored waters on the each other. Holi celebration of Mathura and brij. Where lord Krishna was born and brought ago, is famous world over.

After Holi comes the festival of Gangaur. Women, both married and unmarried, especially celebrate this festival. Beginning from dhulandi, for over a fortnight's time, they perform the pooja of goddess gauri (parvati) and seek her blessings. The unmarried young girls sack the goddess's favor for a good husband, while, the married ones ask for a smooth married life, and good health and a long life of the husband. They conclude it by taking the goddess's well adorned idols in procession with dance and music, and finally immersing them into some pond, river or a well.

The last of the three is the festival of teej, which comes during the rainy season in July-August. Like Gangaur, this festival too is celebrated by women. The young lasses hang swings under the trees and enjoy a lot of swinging with songs and such merriments. On the third of the shraawan (a month of the Hindu calendar) moon, they take the well adorned idols of the goddess into a procession through the markets and open passages, and reach them to their final destination. Many paintings related to these festivals can be seen on the walls of the havelis.

(VIII) Flora and Fauna:

Man has ever been in love with nature. Nature has been an inseparable companion to him. He simply cannot ignore her. Accordingly, she has been given due place and space in the paintings too. In the paintings on the walls of every haveli, you will find lots of pictures of different kinds of natural objects such as blooming flowers, green trees and plants, flowing fountains and rivers, mountains and valleys, moon at night, chirping and flying birds, and grazing and galloping animals. As flowers are integral parts of decoration, the picture frame or the canvasses shown on the walls are decorated

with multi-colored flowers frills. Here or there you can also see the birds perching on the plants or animals grazing on the fields. The walls are patterned with the flower pots too.

(IX) Western Impact:

By the end of the nineteenth century, the English were well established in this part of the country. As representatives of the ruling empire, they lived a luxurious life and enjoyed a special status. They wore novel and peculiar dresses, quite unlike the dresses of the people of Rajasthan. They had never means of transport and modernized styles of life. It is a human nature that the modes and manners of life attract a person much. He naturally desires to adopt them.

Therefore, when the people of this region saw the English in new modes and forms of life, a kind of attraction for them developed into their hearts too. With a wistful desire, they began to adopt and imitate them. Accordingly, in place of the old ones, the new dresses and styles of life, added with the newer means of travel began to be seen in the wall paintings. In the paintings of the post- twenties of the last century, the motor cars and horse coaches. The rail engine with a long train of coaches was also a new thing for the local people. Hence, it became regular object for paintings. The English men and women, wearing large hats and elegant 'weird' dresses, with puppies mounted on to their shoulders also attracted the painters. Similarly, the indigenous people can also be seen in the paintings, adorning themselves after the English fashion. Thus the western life and its modes and manners provided the artists adequate stuff for the paintings.

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